

# Saberhawk 74, Are You OK?



Requires Reading For  
All CO's!!  
R.E. Brooks

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We strapped on our SH-60B and launched out of NAS North Island for a day, warm-up flight to OLF Imperial Beach (IB). With 3,750 pounds of fuel, a crew of four, the Core B Hellfire missile-modification incorporated, and the left-hand extended pylon and FLIR installed, our helicopter was near max gross weight.

We took off more than an hour late because of a maintenance delay. Since I was scheduled for a “double,” I wanted to knock out the first hop in 75 minutes, instead of the scheduled 2.0, and then shave a half-hour off the second 2.5-hour flight. This plan would allow me to land on time and keep the remainder of the schedule on track. IB was ops normal for a late midweek summer afternoon: busy, high density altitude (DA), hazy, wind out of the west, and sun in our face. My copilot was a new pilot-qualified-in-model (PQM), fresh out of the FRS, and with little flight time. Me? I’m the CO.

We arrived at IB about 15 minutes after takeoff. I had my copilot “bust rust”

for 30 minutes on the pads. We transitioned to the runway for autos, but, before shooting the first one while on downwind, I briefed the crew we were over the recommended 18,500 pounds gross weight (GW). The fuel totalizer read 2,980 pounds, putting the aircraft at 19,620 pounds GW.

At 1815, and because the outside-air temperature and DA had come down, I felt we safely could complete the autos. I shot the first auto; it was picture perfect. I was proud of myself because I had had all of 10 minutes of stick time during the flight. I silently patted myself on the back, as I passed the controls to my PQM.

My copilot entered the auto and did a decent job controlling heading, airspeed, rotor rpm (Nr), and ball. He began his flare at 200 feet; however, the nose of the aircraft got a little too high. As a result, our groundspeed rapidly bled off, and then the rate of descent

increased—events happened faster than usual. As we descended through 60 feet AGL, I called “power” and came on the controls. Nr was drooping below 90 percent as we leveled the helicopter. I felt the strong jarring that accompanies a hard landing.

IB tower immediately called, “Saberhawk 74, are you OK?”

Fortunately, no one was hurt. The only aircraft damage was a scraped radar dome. What follows is an excerpt from my endorsement to the hazrep—what the legendary radio figure Paul Harvey calls, “the rest of the story.” I hope my comments put this story in context.

### **The Rest of the Story**

The truth be told, as CO, I could have elected to sweep this whole affair under the rug. However, the message I want to send to my wardroom does not include: Do as I say, not

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as I do; honesty in reporting only applies when it does not make you look bad; or commanding officers are bulletproof. The unique feature of this hazrep is that it is based on human errors—my errors. While you may find my remarks to be somewhat untraditional, I hope you also will find them refreshingly candid.

The bottom line is I made a series of poor choices and overestimated my ability to recognize, react, and recover from a poor autorotation flown by my copilot. I took a nugget who had recently graduated from the FRS, and placed him in a situation that required him to perform at the level of a seasoned fleet aviator. **My safety box (comfort zone) as a helicopter-aircraft commander (HAC) and flight instructor had become too large.** Upon reflection, here are the salient details. (You Swiss-cheese-model fans are going to eat this up—pun intended.)

Slice one. I have more than 18 years of aviation experience, have 2,000 hours of total flight time, have successfully completed three LAMPS deployments on small decks without incident, was a HT flight instructor, and have flown with hundreds of students. While some might argue these facts are a recipe for complacency, I will tell you I am neither satisfied nor content. More appropriately, I had become overconfident in my abilities.

Slice two. My copilot had graduated from the FRS a mere five months before this incident. Since his arrival, he had flown 20 times and accumulated 55.6 flight hours. Of that total, he had only 12.2 flight hours in the last 60 days and 3.9 flight hours in the last 30 days.

Slice three. Unbeknownst to me, my copilot had had difficulty with autorotations in the FRS.

Slice four. After our launch was delayed, instead of flying our scheduled two-hour day “back in the saddle” warm-up hop, I pressed to accomplish the “X” in about 75 minutes, just over the minimum one-hour limit.

Slice five. I knowingly launched with approximately 3,750 pounds of fuel on a flight in which autos are a required maneuver. Thus,


aircraft gross weight was destined to be high at the time autos were conducted.

Slice six. It was late on a typical San Diego summertime afternoon (Read: the sun was in our eyes, and the density altitude was high).

Slice seven. The aircraft gross weight was 19,620 pounds. My squadron defensive-posturing instruction, which provides aircraft commanders guidance on conducting high-risk maneuvers, states, “High-density altitude and/or high gross-weight autorotations above 18,500 pounds gross weight should be avoided.” I chose to disregard my instruction.

Slice eight. As HAC, I had performed the first auto; it was picture perfect, and I was quite proud of myself. Hey, the old man still has it! I proved to the young lad an auto could be accomplished safely, despite everything mentioned above. When I passed him the controls, my confidence was overflowing.

Slice nine. As my copilot commenced the next auto, I was near the controls, instead of riding the controls with him. When we reached 60 feet, I got that sinking feeling in my stomach, indicative of a tail slide. I called for power and reached for the controls—too slow and too late. (Trust me, my pucker factor was pegged.) As Nr drooped, we leveled the aircraft and made a “power-on full autorotation.”

This ignominious incident completely was avoidable. If you take nothing else away from this story, do not be foolish enough to repeat my mistakes. I am not as good as I thought I was—“pride precedeth the fall.” I did not consider the relative inexperience of my copilot—I should have. I was not familiar with my copilot’s strengths and weaknesses—I did not review his training record. I wanted to get the “X”—it was not critical. I launched with a heavy aircraft—it could have been defueled. I disregarded my own instruction—I could have incompleated the hop. I did not ride the controls—that was stupid. Last, but not least, ORM is not a substitute for sound judgment. 

Cdr. Hannan is the commanding officer of HSL-47.

*Super article! Well done to Cdr. Hannan!*

*—RADM Brooks*